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Africa Review

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11 May 1990

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ALA AR 90-011
11 May 1990

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Africa Review

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11 May 1990*Page***Articles****Liberia: Doe Likely to Fall****1**

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Recent rebel gains have accelerated the disintegration of the Liberian Army, fed growing alarm in Monrovia, and caused cracks in the regime that dramatically increase the probability that President Doe will soon fall.

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Articles**Liberia: Doe Likely To Fall**

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Recent rebel gains have accelerated the disintegration of the Liberian Army, fed growing alarm in Monrovia, and caused cracks in the regime that dramatically increase the probability that President Doe will soon fall. The rebels' strength has grown rapidly over the past month and they probably are capable of overrunning Army units in the port of Buchanan and at Roberts International Airfield before moving toward Monrovia. On the government side, inept leadership, reliance on hastily trained new recruits, and mounting tactical and logistic difficulties are sapping Army morale. We believe troops will continue either to desert or retreat toward Monrovia in the face of rebel advances.

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Doe—still convinced that the United States will come to his aid—remains bent on a military solution, but appears to be increasingly isolated and out of touch with the military reality. Political maneuvering indicate that heretofore loyal elements around Doe are moving to protect themselves or improve their bargaining position before the rebels reach Monrovia. Doe's departure is likely to usher in a period of anarchy and bloodletting; no individual or group in the country appears capable of imposing an orderly transition and the rebels have indicated no interest in sharing power. The primary threat to American citizens and installations would come from a breakdown in law and order in Monrovia as the situation there deteriorates. Some Army elements could target Americans in retaliation for their perceived abandonment by the United States.

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Rebels Gaining Upper Hand

The insurgents have maintained the military initiative and gained considerable ground during the past month. As a result of earlier successes, they operate freely in

nearly all of Nimba County, where they recruit and train, and have expanded operations to adjacent counties. During the past two weeks, they have consolidated control at a US corporate-owned rubber estate near the coast—less than 100 miles from Monrovia—where abundant food, vehicles, and other supplies have allowed them to reprovision.

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we estimate the rebels have grown from less than 200 when they began operations in December to roughly 1,000 combatants and 2,000 to 4,000 trainees and supporters, drawn almost entirely from the Gio tribal group in Nimba County that has long suffered under Doe's Krahn.

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The insurgents' ultimate objective is the capital; rebel leader Charles Taylor's claim that his forces are preparing to enter Monrovia to oust Doe soon is fueling alarm there and has triggered an exodus of expatriates. We believe that the rebels probably are bringing arms and reinforcements from their base camps in Nimba before resuming their march toward the capital, and are likely to be ready to move again soon. They probably will first try to demoralize the Army further by taking the port of Buchanan, but could bypass the port and attempt to seize Roberts International Airfield, a vital objective on the road to Monrovia. Their progress probably would be slowed substantially if retreating Army forces destroyed a key bridge west of Buchanan.

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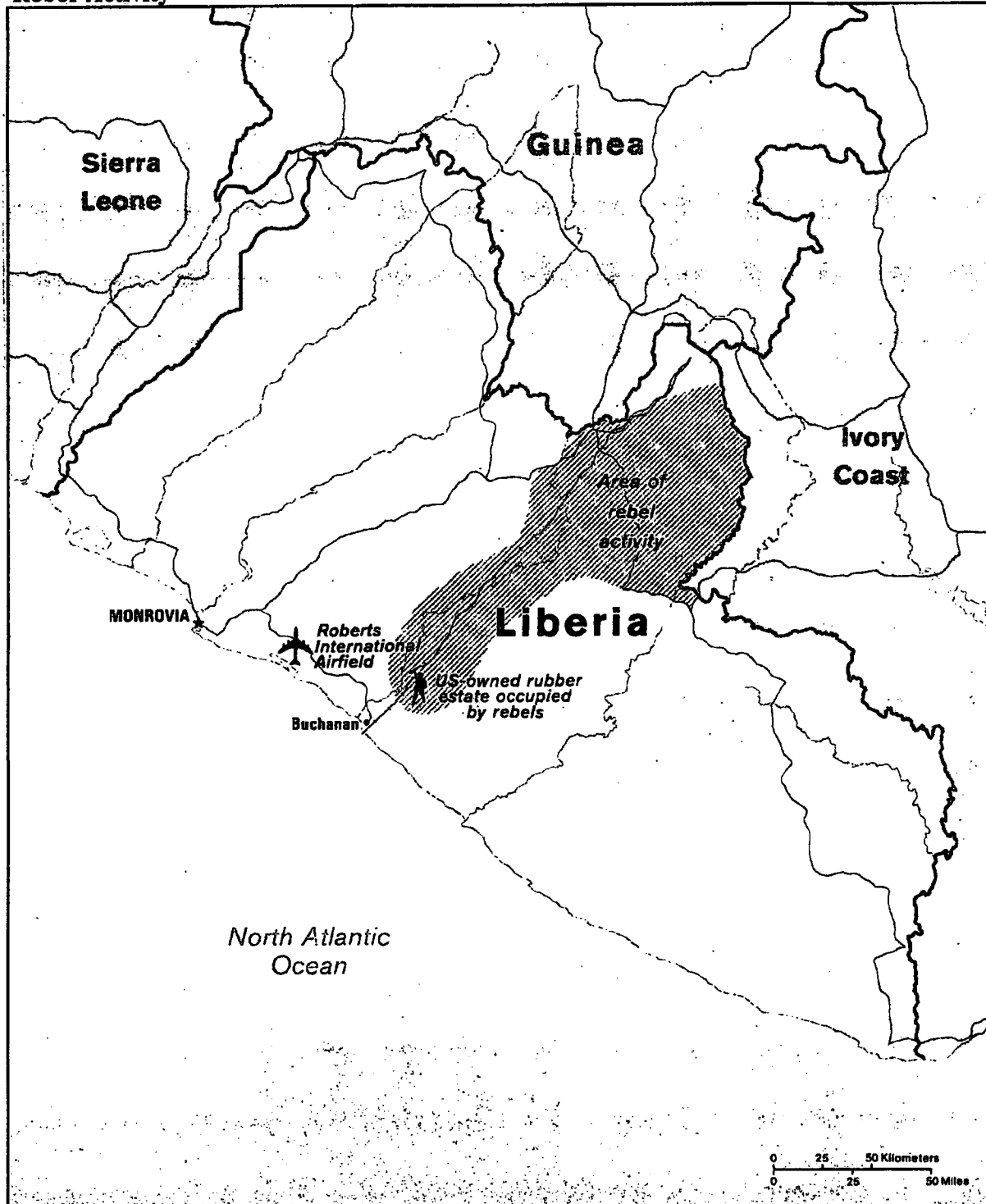
the rebels also may be planning to set up another base at the Firestone rubber plantation, near Roberts, before attacking the capital.

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Rebel Activity



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Army attempts since December to push back the rebels have been crippled by incompetent leadership and an inability to implement a coherent counterinsurgency strategy. Regional commanders have been shuffled frequently and have had little chance to establish control over their troops, composed largely of hastily trained new recruits. The Army's recent and sudden decision to replace General Craig in Buchanan after only a few weeks as commander there is only the latest example of increasingly erratic personnel policies.

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[redacted] the breakdown in military leadership has precluded planning, leaving key installations such as Roberts Airfield virtually unguarded. [redacted]

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The unwillingness of troops to fight is a fundamental problem. Chronic desertions—of some 1,400 troops deployed to Nimba County and Buchanan, less than 600 can be accounted for—have severely hampered Army operations. Even members of Doe's Krahn group apparently are deserting. [redacted]

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mounting tactical and logistic difficulties—severe shortages of weapons, vehicles, gasoline, and ammunition—are limiting their ability to engage the rebels. Although [redacted]

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[redacted] recent arms shipments and other military assistance [redacted] will temporarily boost Army morale, we doubt that the ill-trained troops will be able to use them effectively.

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Outlook

Doe is almost certain to fall, in our judgment. His growing isolation and the military's glaring deficiencies severely limit chances the President would be able to forestall his departure through military or political means. We judge that Doe's loyalist forces probably have little prospect of stopping the rebel advance, let alone defeating the rebels militarily. Although the estimated 750 remaining members of the executive mansion guard and the special antiterrorist unit in Monrovia probably would be capable of protecting the executive mansion, it is unlikely they could defend the city as well, and they may lack the will to do either. The other soldiers assigned to guard Monrovia are poorly trained and ill-equipped for urban combat. Nonetheless, Doe has said repeatedly that he is unwilling to seek a political compromise with the rebels; even if he accepts that he has no alternative, we doubt that Taylor would agree to negotiate with him.

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We doubt that any individual or group in the country will be in a position to promote an orderly transition. Instead, we expect Doe's departure to usher in a period of anarchy and ethnic bloodletting, especially in Monrovia, the duration and severity of which will depend in part on how he leaves power. If Doe goes voluntarily, leaving a senior non-Krahn military officer, such as Defense Minister Barclay, in command, Doe's successors might be able to negotiate with rebel leaders to end the confusion and begin building a coalition government. [redacted]

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Charles Taylor

Charles Taylor—head of the National Patriotic Front of Liberia and leader of a more than four-month-old insurgency against the Liberian Government

Taylor was not thought at the outset of rebel operations in December 1989 to have the necessary military experience to engineer President Doe's overthrow. Several factors—including indiscipline on the part of the Liberian Army, tribal animosities ripe for exploitation, widespread discouragement with Doe's rule, and Taylor's persistence and underestimated leadership skills—have strengthened his prospects. Taylor has claimed he wants to promote democracy, but press interviews cast doubt on his intentions; recently Taylor stated he plans to remain head of state for at least five years after taking power.

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It is increasingly clear that Taylor is determined to succeed Doe. In January 1990 Taylor stated his objective as "an all-out armed struggle until Doe is removed and a democratically elected government is brought to power, not necessarily headed by me, Charles Taylor." Since then his appetite appears to have grown in proportion to his military successes. Recently, he explained to the international press that the Liberian people had begged him to initiate the coup and would be so grateful for a return to true democracy that they would force him to become leader.

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Taylor is not a natural fan of the United States, but probably realizes that maintenance of the historically close US-Liberian relationship could be crucial to the survival of a fledgling regime under his control. As an adviser to the then-new Doe government in 1980, he promoted a policy of "genuine nonalignment" and threatened on various occasions to strengthen ties to anti-US regimes.

On the other hand, in recent months Taylor has avoided anti-US statements and appears to be going out of his way to assure goodwill toward the United States: "Americans are decent people, they are our friends . . . We intend having good relationships," he has said.

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Born in southwestern Liberia, Taylor is an Americo-Liberian, descended from freed US slaves who established Liberia in the 19th century. He lived in the United States in the 1970s—possibly earning a master's degree in economics—and subsequently went into the import-export business near Boston. Returning to Liberia to accept a post in the Doe government, Taylor was cashiered in 1983 for alleged large-scale theft of government funds and coup plotting. Having fled to the United States, he was arrested at Monrovia's request but later escaped from jail. He returned to Africa where he became involved in dissident activity.

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government troops probably would not respond to commands from any new leaders to engage the rebels. If Taylor's forces gained the upper hand, we believe the rebels would indiscriminately begin slaughtering Krahn's, seeking retribution for Army atrocities committed against their fellow Gio tribesmen.

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Moreover, given the low level of troop morale and discipline, many of the remaining

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How Taylor reacts to emerging circumstances also will play a major part in determining the length and intensity of turbulence in the capital. In our view, the violence after Doe falls, but before a clear successor emerges, would be unlikely to subside quickly, unless Taylor could be persuaded to cooperate with other political groups rather than bidding for sole control by force. The prospects for reaching a compromise would be complicated further if any of the several groups of exiled Liberian dissidents—sensing the end of Doe's rule is at hand—enters the fighting [redacted]

groups. As a Liberian of American descent, or so-called Americo-Liberian, Taylor probably has few personal supporters and is viewed with suspicion by most indigenous groups. They fear he is using the Gio-Krahn conflict to restore power to the Americo-Liberian minority that ruled Liberia before Doe.

To ensure his takeover or consolidate his control, Taylor may request increased assistance from his Libyan backers. If he believes the rebels will win, Libyan leader Qadhafi probably would be tempted to increase clandestine support even before they reached the

Although we cannot rule out Taylor's willingness to negotiate in such circumstances, his statements so far suggest that he is opposed to sharing power with other

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capital, perhaps by airlifting supplies if the rebels controlled Roberts Airfield. If the rebels reach Monrovia and claim power, Qadhafi probably would respond—as he did when Rawlings assumed power in Ghana in 1980—by recognizing Taylor's new government and flying in arms and ammunition to help shore up Taylor's fledgling regime. Qadhafi probably would consider sending Libyan military personnel as advisers and instructors only if he judged that Taylor was firmly in control. [redacted]

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Implications for the United States

The primary threat to American citizens and installations would come from a breakdown in Army discipline and law and order in Monrovia. The potential for such a development will increase substantially if the Army fails to stop the rebels at Buchanan. If the insurgents seize Roberts Airfield, less than 30 miles from Buchanan, the 5,000 US citizens remaining in Liberia could be stranded, although most are scattered throughout the countryside where they probably would be at less risk than those in Monrovia.¹ We doubt that either the government or Taylor would deliberately seek to harm US citizens who stay, but Americans could be subjected to unauthorized harassment or caught in a crossfire between rebels and government troops. The US communications relay facilities near Monrovia probably would not be threatened [redacted] although

Liberian citizens, including some soldiers, may seek refuge at the sites. [redacted] the Voice of America installation outside Monrovia probably is the most vulnerable US facility. It could be a target for rebels seeking to take advantage of its large stocks of food, fuel, and vehicles, and could turn into a conflict zone between rebels and soldiers. [redacted]

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As the security situation deteriorates, representatives from both the Liberian Government—such as some members of a delegation who were due in Washington for talks beginning 7 May—and the Taylor rebel group are likely to appeal to the United States for a public show of support. Doe or the survivors from his regime may plead for US intervention to prevent bloodshed, while the rebels would probably seek US recognition to legitimize their authority over the country. Taylor's political agenda, beyond overthrowing Doe and seizing power for himself, is vague. Although Taylor has claimed he would eventually hold elections and restore civilian rule, his sincerity is suspect. Taylor also has tried to dispel concerns that he is anti-US, and his ties to Libya probably are as opportunistic as are Qadhafi's to him. Taylor might try, however, to use US facilities as leverage in an effort to obtain economic assistance.

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¹As many as several thousand other Liberians may hold dual US citizenship. [redacted]

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